

Japanese Foods Near You

— Foods Used as Coating Material (Persimmon) —

Autumn is harvesting season. In addition to rice, many crops, including a variety of potatoes and fruits, are harvested, and appetites pick up as the autumn breeze drifts in and the weather becomes moderate.

In the suburbs, it is typical to see fruit-laden persimmon trees against a clear, blue sky. Persimmons are said to be the king of all fruits. Sweet persimmons are eaten as they are for snacks and dessert, while astringent persimmons can be enjoyed in many different ways. For example, they can be ripened, hand-dried, or treated with alcohol, carbon dioxide, or heat to remove their astringency.

Have you ever mistakenly bitten into an astringent persimmon that you thought was a sweet persimmon? With one bite, the astringent taste will fill your mouth and cause you to pucker your face for a little while. However, astringent persimmons are not all bad. The juice extracted from them has a naturally coagulating quality, and has been used widely as a strengthening or waterproofing coating since the ancient Heian Period (8th – 12th century).

Shibusen, a type of Japanese folding fan, is made with Japanese paper that is dyed a certain color and coated with persimmon juice before it is pasted onto the frame of the fan. The persimmon juice strengthens the paper and makes it crisp. It also gives the fan a special gloss that creates a uniquely attractive texture.

Persimmon juice was also used in making the *bangasa* umbrella. Most umbrellas sold today are made of cloth, nylon, or plastic, and in the event of sudden rain, they can be purchased at convenience stores for prices in the range of 500 to 1,000 yen. In olden days, however, people took shelter from the rain under a *bangasa*, which was made with paper coated with persimmon juice. The pattering of raindrops hitting and bouncing off the *bangasa* had a soothing effect that almost made people forget the dismal rain. Unfortunately though, the *bangasa* are hardly seen anymore.

In architecture, the pillars of a house used to be coated with persimmon juice, but again, such brown, persimmon-dyed pillars can only be found in old folk houses today.

Granted, recent advancements in science have given rise to diverse materials and have made our lives more convenient. However, there is much to be said about the simply admirable wisdom and attitudes of our ancestors who made thorough use of items in their surroundings based on proper knowledge of their characteristics and applied them to daily life.

身近にある日本の食物

— 塗料などとして利用される食物 (柿) —

収穫の秋。コメをはじめとして、芋類、果樹類など、たくさんの作物が収穫されます。秋風が立ち、気候も穏やかになってくると、食欲も盛んになります。

郊外では澄みきった青空に、たわわに実をつけた柿の木を目にすることができます。柿は果物の王様とも言われています。甘柿はそのまま、おやつやデザートとして食べますが、渋柿は、熟柿や干し柿、さらにはアルコール・炭酸ガス・加熱等による渋抜きの方法で渋味を感じなくさせるなど、いろいろな工夫で楽しんで食べることができます。



さて、渋柿を甘柿と間違っかぶりついたことはありませんか。口の中が渋くて、その渋さにしばらくは顔がくしゃくしゃになってしまいます。ところが、渋柿も捨てたものではなく、抽出した柿渋には凝固しやすい性質があるため、日本では平安時代から補強・防水用の塗料として広く利用されてきました。

「渋扇」という扇子があります。扇子に貼る和紙の下地に色を引き、その上に柿渋を塗ったものです。パリッと丈夫になり、独特のつやがでて、なんともいえない風合いです。



「番傘」という雨傘があります。今では、雨傘は布・ナイロン・ビニール製のものがほとんどで、急な雨に遭っても、コンビニエンスストアで500円から1,000円くらいで買い求めることができます。昔は、雨を防ぐ傘は、紙を貼った上に柿渋を塗って防水を施した番傘でした。雨粒をパチパチとはじき、その昔は雨のうっとうしさを忘れさせてくれる風情がありました。今ではほとんど見かけなくなりました。

また、柿渋は建築用として家の柱などに塗ったりしますが、その茶色い柱も古民家などでしか見ることができなくなりました。

昨今、科学の発達とともに、いろいろな素材が開発され、生活は便利になっていますが、先人達の、身近にある物の特徴を知り、それらを無駄なく利用し、生活に活かしてきたその知恵や姿勢には、ただただ頭が下がる思いです。